Joseph Edward Bolton

Breckinridge County Suite:
To A Young Kentucky Woman

To Rebecca

Lord: it is time. The huge summer has gone by.
— Rainer Maria Rilke,
"Autumn Day"

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There is no such thing as innocence in autumn,
Yet, it may be, innocence is never lost.
— Wallace Stevens,
"Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery"

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Did she feel that now, having met her father at last, she was now truly bereaved and alone? That only when you are truly alone, can you begin to live? That when you truly begin to live you must construct your own world and therefore have no need for words written on paper, words that can only give the shadow of a world already lived?

— Robert Penn Warren,
*World Enough and Time*
I. *The Ohio*

Seven miles south of anywhere
You'd rather be, it is autumn.
What sweetened shrivels
What shriveled falls,
And what fell is leafrot,
A sick rich scent on the air.

You are paling, you are bored,
You are zipping up your jacket
And walking into a dynamo
Of twilight and raw wind,
Tossing your hair as a brief bruise
Of pink scores the horizon.

Seven miles north, below the lights
From the bars and dance halls
Of small towns, the Ohio swells
With a dark cargo of barges,
And catfish twist through the bones
Of what never bothered to rise.

II. *The Summer Loves*

How deftly they undressed you,
Laid you down,
Their rough hands opening you like a flower
In a field of flowers, their faces
Dark with your dark.

— Boys, you'd say now, though you
Never minded much,
And once you'd got them out of their daddy's truck
And one good shirt, found them generally
Adequate for your purposes.
Hardly anything was ever said
At the time,
And little was ever said later that found its way
Back to you. Still, there must have been
Talk, for there is always talk.

They took their time, and when they
Came, you came.
And it was as if your own body betrayed you then —
As if only their body above yours kept you
From falling into the blue of sky.

III. The Prototypical Ghosts

The west field, wasted, seems day by day to recede
From the warped kitchen window where you stand in steam,
Your hand gone limp as the rag that won’t drop from it.
Like worn-out records, your frail parents, aging

Even when you were born, in their dotage
Seem more and more the prototypical ghosts
Of themselves, as if fifty years of food
From the same gray land had turned them gray as the land.

They hardly make a sound now, unless it is
To rasp a vague complaint, half remember a year
That has forgotten them, or tap against the table
Some object that’s outlasted its significance.

The old and the new songs of heartbreak sound the same.
It’s only when the needle grinds in the grooves
That a sadness greater than your own comes on,
And the dead begin to live again, in you.
IV. *Hard County*

It is, even now, a hard county to live in.

Full summer is invisible fire under cypresses  
Dying of thirst,  
And you think of the dog days it got too hot  
To do much else but sit and sweat  
And watch the ground bake till it cracked.

Or, wintering, it could be the New World:  
The empty duskward distances  
And killing promise of snow.  
You still remember the night it fell to fifteen below.  
You were sitting at the kitchen table,  
Ten years old,  
A blanket on your lap and a bowl  
Of snow cream in front of you.  
Your mother was stoking the stove.  
You saw, through the window, the west field  
Silvered with snow and starlight. Saw  
The figure of your father crossing the field,  
And the load he carried curled in his arms:  
A calf that had picked a bad night for being born.  
He brought it in to warm it by the stove,  
Red ice of afterbirth melting into pools  
And the poor thing’s ears already frozen off.

Now, in autumn, walking the long mile  
Back from the empty mailbox,  
You can see the place, what’s left of it:  
Two Plyminths and a ’34 Ford  
Squat rusting, wheelless, home  
To broken tools and rotten clothes, mice.  
Gray barns and outbuildings lean graying.  
And the white house is white  
Only in memory,  
For the photographs, too, have faded.  
Back of the smokehouse, from limp fur, the skull  
Of an eaten raccoon grins skyward.
You wonder if there was ever any glory to be had here,
And if not, then why, for two hundred years,
Anybody has bothered . . . .

A hard country to live in, yes,
But not a hard country in which to find
A place to drown oneself.
You think of water, of the names
Of water: Sinking River, Rough River Lake,
South Fork of the Panther.
And all of it flowing Ohioward, Gulfward.

For water everywhere rages to be with other water;
Or, held isolate in ponds, in the hoofprint
Of the thousand-pound heifer after rain,
Reflects the utter emptiness of sky.

And water is as empty as sky, only
Easier to fall into,
Heavier to breathe.

V. On the Square

It could be any Southern town you care to name:
Bank, diner, hardware store, lone traffic light.
Saturdays, you come to buy everything
That can't be grown, contrived, or done without.

Old men sit spitting on the courthouse steps.
A boy in a Camaro squeals, once, his wide new tires.
Women test their reflections in the windows of the shops
They pass, hoping to find some lost beauty restored.

And when those eyes, for a moment, hold yours, they seem
To hold some insolence. You think they think you
Are guilty of some crime beyond the crime
All are guilty of. And oh, my dear, they do!

And so do you.
After the life is lived,
And the world is what it is,
There is only the story:

At Stevensport, the Sinking River
Empties into the Ohio,
And the Ohio widens.

Or does the story perhaps precede
The living of it, as the new day
Seems to depend on the cock's cry?

And do the dead and the unborn occupy
The same dimensionless dimension,
Or are they simply where they seem to be?

It would be easy enough to say
What happened, could you only
Bring yourself to:
A girl —
No, a young woman — who has lived her life
With old-time parents on a farm
On what the Indians once called the Dark
And Bloody Ground, and who
Has a perhaps somewhat imprudent appetite
For things sensual, falls in love.
His speech and dress and manner
Are slightly strange to her at first, but she
Is taken with the simultaneous
Inward frailty and successful outward gesture
With which he lives in the world, of which
He seems already to have seen much.

In the summer of your first and one great love,
Stars flared nightly in the architecture of sky,
And the world opened up beneath that sky.
The scenes flash and fade now like summer starfall:
Parked in his white car down some dark road;
Driving to Owensboro and Bowling Green; dancing
In a little dive in Tell City, Indiana...
You see yourself — that self — like old portraits
Of those who, no longer living, live
In the flash and fade of a moment torn from time.

Once, the city lured her.
Once, watching the lights
Of Louisville come slowly on in summer dusk,
She thought... what?
That this would last forever? or even
Outlast forever?

Later,
Going there to undo
What the two of you had done,
You saw how dirty-gray the city was,
As morning came on and the poorer people rose
To the day's indecencies,
And you saw you were suddenly one of them ... .
When it was over, you had to have him
Stop the car so you could throw up,
Then hugged yourself all the way home.

And she never caught sight of him again.

And so are left to remember the summer nights
When, half-drunk in your daddy's truck or his white car,
You'd take the hills and turns on Rough River Road
At seventy, just to feel your insides rise.
And laugh for surviving it, and look for shooting stars.

The white car was all that was left of him.
No body, or note, was ever discovered.
— Only the white car, shining in September dawn
Beside the Sinking River at Stevensport ....
And which circumstances have, of course,
Led to speculation:

that he got you
Into trouble and couldn't stand himself for it;
That you, never good, drove him to it;  
That he only wanted to make it look  
As if he were dead, and is living it up  
In Chicago or Indianapolis or some such place.

The rumors, unverified, multiply,  
While the people you went to school with  
Marry, buy farms, go bankrupt, get divorced,  
And move off to the city, looking for work.

The night is starless, utterly still.

You are careful not to let these pieces  
Of a narrative cohere  
Into anything that might explain too much.

For you, who live in the world,  
Must let the world  
Remain ambiguous.

And it just wouldn't be right  
To blame a drowned boy  
For not floating up bloated,

Or not leaving a note,  
Or perhaps not even  
Drowning himself at all.

VII. Making Love in a Colored Graveyard

Walking past the garden, you see it's grayed,  
Okra withered to seed and sunflower  
Self-decapitated. It is the hour  
When you can hear the grass die, blade by blade.  
Where are you going, hearing the grass die,  
Casting no shadow under the sunless sky?

Daddy, take me to the colored graveyard!  
It was spring, and you, a child, rode piggyback
On his shoulders past the newly-turned black
Of fields soon to swell green, imagining you heard
Monsters from the woods and taunting with shrill song
The bovine beasts who'd fatten all summer long.

He let you down at the edge of the woodslot
Where beech, black gum and pin oak formed a nave
Of incessant half-darkness, and a grave
Might go unfound forever, save for fox or muskrat
But knowing the place and its story, he showed you seven
Blank wafers of stone under that half-lit heaven,

And, making you stand still and quiet, said:
"Sometimes, if you listen hard, you can hear —
And especially if you come in the fall of the year —
Them singing. It's the songs they sang for their dead."
But you, for all your listening, heard only
The creek running nearby, and thought the dead lonely.

Years later, in summer, you took your lover there;
And though the stones had sunk some, you found them
Among green fern and ginseng. Limb by limb,
The light climbed down through that tangle of leafy air.
You told him the story, and listened together, then laughed
When he pressed you against a moss-soft sassafras

And stopped your cry of No, we can't, not here
With his mouth over yours and his deft hands
Already undoing you. It was as if the land
Knew when you came together — when, in your ears,
Above bird-cry and leaf-stir, your blood rang.
And then, if only that once, the dead sang.

Now, coming back to the place in autumn,
You watch rose- and wine-colored leaves swirl down,
And, seeing the stones now barely break the ground,
Think: So this is what it does to things, time.
The creek leaf-choked, you can hear the grass die.
Under the clouds, come. Sit. Hear the grass die.
VIII. The Sinking River at Stevensport

Closing your eyes, you can see
What nobody ever saw:
It is midnight, past midnight,
The figure just visible
In moonless, dew-laden dark
Where river empties into
River and the water makes
No sound, or a sound like time,
Which stands still now on the bank.
He, too, stands still on the bank,
Late-summer night wind whipping
The white linen of his coat —
For, yes, he always did have
A sense of style in such things.
Behind him, the white car shines
Under what starlight there is.
He stares at what stars there are.
And remembers — or does he? —
The flowered dress he bought you
And raised above your waist here
So you could straddle his lap.
Does he think of the river
Lit at Louisville, where some-
Thing he can hardly admit
To himself happened? Happened
To you, though you both agreed
It was the best thing to do . . . .
Does he speak aloud now to
No one? Does he say a name?
Does he say your name before
He walks into the river?
Or does he just walk away?
You must believe both stories
Till the world makes up its mind.
Either way, the white car shines,
Till dawn lights the water, and
— All this behind your closed eyes —
That wide water seems to hold
The dead in their element.
IX. Storm

The big clock ticks off afternoon,
Time's brass teardrop hung
In dark cherrywood.

The radio, between three-minute tragedies
Heart-felt and with fiddles,
says storm,
And you turn it down
And pick up the phone just to see if it's gone dead,
Which it has,
and the big clock ticks . . .

Until you are afraid.
— Not of the old house darkening
As the sky fills with fast clouds,
Or of your parents' deaths,
Or of dying,
Or of anything you could put your finger on
Or name.

Shut the windows.
Call the cat inside, who's black
With gold-green eyes that know
something's up.

Now wait.
Rub your raw hands, and wait . . .

It hits.

Lightning makes terrible tattoos,
Slow boom of air exploding
Then a faint crackling,
And the whole process repeating itself
Till rain falling sheet on heavy sheet
Drowns out sound and remembrance
of all else.
It lasts, perhaps, an hour.

   Afterwards,
Everything stands glass-glazed,
Stunned trembling.

You walk in the rainbowed world,
Feeling grass blades catch between your toes
And smelling what you don't know is ozone,
A little bit of heaven come down to call.

   X. In the Attic

You sleep where only slanting slats and shingles
   Separate you from
     Sky.

Or do not sleep, but simply lie there and turn,
   As you know the stars, too, must turn,
     If you could see them.

A wind, and the cottonwood scrapes at the roof
   Like a claw, like the cold hands
     Of the dead.

Your body can't seem to warm the quilts over you;
   You lie there, shivering,
     And turn . . .

Until what blooms behind your eyes betrays you,
   And you decide to give it up —
     Light the lamp.

It was long ago that you found, far back
   In the dresser, in a dark box,
     The photographs.
You get them out now and spread them in the closest
Chronology you can contrive, then
Put back all but three:

Your father, handsome, stands smiling by water
In the south of France
In 1945;

Your mother's face, beautiful and tinted rose,
Floats up at you through the sepia
Of its lost world;

And here is the aunt, also beautiful, whose love
Came to a bad end having something
To do with a gun,

And who is hardly ever spoken of, but who you
Understand occupies a stark place
In Hopkinsville.

You'd find it hard to say just what any of this
Has to do with you,
And yet

The stilled faces, caught both in and out of time, seem
To require some nameless something of you.
Near dawn,

You pour boiling water into a washtub and bathe,
Then pee in the bathwater, humming
A made-up tune.

XI. *Your Shadow*

The day your father dies,
It rains. You are mildly surprised
At how easily the world absorbs the blow,
How little there is to be done.
You bury him on a crisp afternoon
In the colored graveyard — because,
It turns out, that was his desire.
Thus, attendance is small.
For the kind, fat minister’s Words,
You give him twenty dollars and a tight smile.

Sun has shocked the country
Into its final beauty of the year:
What leaves still hang hang in goldness
Against a liquid blue, and the fescue,
Swept with wind, shines its green —
The last green thing there is,
Save for some dark, sparse pines
In silhouette on the far ridge.

You linger a moment among flowers,
Then follow your shapely shadow back to the house.

You notice how good you look in black.

XII. *The Monument*

And so it always happens
That women, in half-lives,
Survive the ruined world
Men make and, ruining,
Leave:

There is you,
And there is your mother,
Who remains only as a lightning-
Struck white oak remains
Standing gaunt on a hillside
Long after it’s hollowed out.

And there is the aunt, and,
After three days of receiving
Farm wives who arrive with little
To say but much to eat,  
You go to her,  
    driving south-  
Ward to Bowling Green, then  
West on 68 through Auburn,  
Russellville, Elkton. East  
Of Hopkinsville, and taller  
Than any silo in the country,

The Jefferson Davis Monument  
Stands honing the pyramid  
Of its pinnacle on blue air,  
Looming there as if it could  
Outlast the country itself.

XIII. At the Asylum

When the moon changes  
On the east side of Hopkinsville,  
    Hardly human cries  
Drift through the barred-over windows  
    Of a squat brick building.

Prison? No . . .  
That other place — the one no one  
    Says the name of,  
Though the letters on the sign at the gate  
    Are clearly legible:

WESTERN STATE HOSPITAL.  
You tell them who you are, and they  
    Let you through  
To a circular driveway under grand oaks  
    Bare with winter coming on,

    Shards of sky gone  
The opaque gray of stone through the branches.  
    You think the place smells  
Like your old grade school, or the courthouse  
    At Hardinsburg,
As you follow the sound
Of a nurse's rubber shoes down a corridor.
The face
Is no worse than you expected, though you
Expected the worst:

Cheeks sagged
Like a scrotum; the mouth a wound
Unhealing, with a half-
Moustache above it; and the eyes
Pitch black, vision

Turned inward
For . . . how many years now?
And this the face
Of one who was once beautiful,
And who does not

Recognize you now.
She'll tell you her story, though,
Which has no pattern
Or end, but goes on dawn to dark
In babble-drool.

It is the story
Of lovers, and a lost place and time,
And a fall,
Which is only the oldest story there is,
Which is your story,

But which you cannot
Know the ending of till you've lived it,
Or chosen not
To live it, or chosen her way,
Which would be easy.

You drive away
Through a tunnel your headlights make in the dark
Toward a final darkness,
Which is the only place you've ever known,
Which is home.
XIV. *Intimate Variations*

Listen: the wind is singing.  
It is singing in the corrugated  
Bark of a bare hickory,  
In the gray woodwinds of grapevine,  
In the rust softening the barbs  
Of a sagging fencerow.

Listen: nothing. And yet  
The utter soundlessness of things  
Drawing constantly deeper  
Into themselves can seem  
The intensest of cries  
To a young woman undressing —

Undressing, for no one, in an attic  
Voluptuous with the scent  
Of intimate variations  
On a more common history —  
Undressing simply to lie down  
And let the dark undo her.